Negotiating a Future for Convent Libraries: KADOC-KU Leuven and Heritage Partnerships in Belgium

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1 Introduction

As in many other Western European countries, religious institutes in Belgium are confronted with changing contexts and new perspectives.\(^1\) An era of revival and exceptional expansion of religious life during the 19th and first half of the 20th century was followed by decreasing numbers and an erosion of established structures since the second half of the 20th century. Although this evolution can be placed in a much broader and recurrent process of religious vitalism, reform and decline that dates back to the origins of Western monasticism, the rapidly changing post-1950 context did create serious challenges for the continuity of religious identity and structures. Complex social developments like the cultural revolution in the sixties destabilised the central position of the Catholic Church in European societies and impacted the important societal role of religious institutes in education, (health) care and other social provisions. Amidst the multiple and intertwined processes of the fading importance of traditional clerical structures, the fundamental reform of the Catholic Church during and after the Second Vatican Council and the emergence of new religious, charismatic and spiritual movements, religious institutes had to reposition themselves in church and society.\(^2\)

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In Belgium, the number of male and female religious decreased from over 62,000 at its height in 1947 to approximately 40,000 in 1973 and just over 9,000 in 2018. The overall majority of them (80%) are over 75. Although these evolutions have to be contextualised in a broader and century-old evolution of membership statistics and recruitment challenges, the contemporary decline in numbers is especially precarious in its contrast with the previous era of exceptional expansion. Despite the fact that many communities have already chosen to relocate to smaller convent buildings, a substantial number of male and female religious are still living in their original monastic or convent buildings. Often constructed or expanded during the abovementioned decades of revival and expansion and intense apostolic activity, this infrastructure does not longer reflect the actual needs of convent communities. Religious superiors are faced with issues of reorganisation to keep their finances in check and to maintain dynamic communities. Many orders and congregations centralise their activities and regroup members. These changes often imply abandonment, reconversion and even destruction of convents, monasteries and abbeys. Communities faced with leaving their original convent buildings are confronted with the delicate task of ‘emptying’ their houses and the search for places to reallocate their material belongings.

In the midst of this difficult practical and emotional process, solutions have to be found for the heritage collections of the religious communities. In the course of time, religious institutes created large and rich collections of publications, manuscripts, journals, photographs, films, archival documents and religious and cultural objects that reflect their history, identity and activities and those of their members. These memories, sometimes very carefully preserved and cherished in separate libraries, archival rooms or little convent museums, are not easy to transfer to smaller convent buildings, service flats or retirement homes.

In some cases, the process of relocation is carefully planned. A selection is made of ‘core heritage’ that will be preserved by the religious community. For the other heritage collections, solutions are searched elsewhere. Negotiations
are started with local heritage partners or professional institutions to transfer and to secure the future of archives, libraries and collections of religious and cultural objects. In other cases, however none or only small preparations have been made and buildings need to be emptied on a short notice. The biggest challenge resides in the timeframe to find adequate and satisfying solutions and to manage the appraisal, selection and relocation of voluminous collections. This forces religious institutes to make rapid decisions about their heritage collections. Although well-intended, not all of them are well-considered. Parts of the collections are sometimes ‘handed out’ to different heritage institutions, friends and relatives, but without preparatory consultation or the creation of an overall inventory. This inevitably causes a loss of crucial context information.

Religious institutes do also have to deal with financial dilemmas. Confronted with financial problems, inspired by evangelical ideals to renounce to valuable possessions, or using their legitimate rights as property owners, the option to sell precious items of their heritage collections to antique dealers or book collectors is comprehensible, but problematic as well. These actions can threaten the homogeneity of their collections, but also create the risk that important items of national interest end up in private and closed collections or are moved abroad. Moreover, the presence of valuable heritage in convent collections may attract people whose personal interests or profit making objectives prevail on the care for and preservation of the items with a unique historical, cultural and religious value. Within the Belgian context, several cases testify of this dramatic loss of heritage.6

To prevent future cases of heritage loss or uncontrolled fragmentation, heritage partnerships and networks of professional heritage institutions are crucial to support the large and diverse convent world. This chapter focuses on the position of KADOC-KU Leuven as a partner in the management and conservation of religious heritage, with specific attention to its role in the appraisal, preservation and valorisation of library collections. First, a short overview will be made of the history of KADOC, its collection and the evolution of the centre’s consultancy for the heritage of religious institutes. In a second chapter, the fascinating diversity of library collections of Belgian religious institutes will be illustrated by analysing some collections that have been deposited at KADOC in recent decades. In the last part, an analysis will be made of the challenges

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and opportunities of heritage partnerships in relation to the future of library collections of religious institutes.

2 KADOC-KU Leuven: Preservation, Valorisation and Consultancy

KADOC-KU Leuven was established as a Catholic Documentation and Research Centre at KU Leuven (Flanders, Belgium) in 1976. Its foundation stemmed from concerns about the future of heritage collections of and about Catholic (inspired) organisations and institutions in the context of the above-mentioned transformations in church and society and the gradual disintegration of the so-called Catholic ‘pillar’ (including Catholic political, economic, socio-cultural and religious organisations). Belgium (or Flanders) does not have a regulation for the conservation or destruction of ‘movable’ heritage collections (archives, publications, audiovisual collections) of private persons or organisations, except for some legal documents like contracts or VAT forms and a limited number of selected ‘masterpieces’ (topstukken). The absence of a legal framework combined with the societal changes caused a potential mass destruction of heritage and information concerning the Catholic societal tissue that was of major importance for Belgian history. Documents, photographs, films, books and periodicals with historical or cultural value, but that were not considered essential to the legal or current administration of Catholic organisations were under threat. Hence, a number of researchers at KU Leuven founded a documentation and research centre aiming to safeguard this heritage and to promote, facilitate and conduct research and valorisation initiatives.

Similar initiatives for the heritage of social, liberal and Flemish-nationalist inspired persons and organisations developed almost simultaneously in Flanders, which induced a special bond and multiple partnerships between them. In 1985 a legal framework was created by the Flemish government to accredit and support these “archives and documentation centres based on social-ideological movements” or so-called “private cultural archives.” With the financial support of the Flemish government, the University of Leuven, the Flemish dioceses, Catholic organisations and religious institutes, KADOC developed from a small initiative without funding into an accredited research and heritage institution and an interfaculty centre of the University of Leuven. Meanwhile, the thematic focus of the centre expanded from Catholic inspired

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7 Flemish decree of 27 June 1985 concerning the accreditation and subsidising of private archives and documentation centres.
organisations and institutes to the diverse field in the interplay between religion, culture and society in a Belgian, European and global context since 1750. In the beginning of the 21st century, the centre very explicitly broadened its horizon towards non-Christian denominations, religions and spiritual movements.

In the first decades of its existence KADOC invested in expanding its expertise and in building a network. The centre aimed to become a ‘house of trust’, where heritage creators could leave their memories in the hands of professional archivists and librarians and could find a partner for professional advice about collection management and valorisation. Mutual confidence is an important factor. First of all, as stated earlier, because heritage collections can have an emotional value for the creator. Books or archival documents, especially ego documents like letters and diaries but also photographs and films, can be cherished as precious items and memories. Many convent communities carefully preserved documents and objects about their founder or created photo albums to remember their origins, identity and treasured moments in their history. For religious institutes as well as for other heritage creators, depositing a heritage collection therefore often means leaving behind a part of themselves. Second, since historical documents can have an ongoing legal force of evidence, there needs to be a relationship of trust that materials are kept under good conditions and they can be retrieved whenever necessary. Official agreements between KADOC and the heritage owners fix the specific modalities of a deposit of library or archival collections: the creation of an inventory, the process of selection, conditions for consultation and long-term storage as well as the financial costs involved. Clear agreements and confidence are all the more important with regard to appraisal and selection of material that will not be retained – an inevitable part of the management of heritage.

Furthermore, heritage, especially archives, can contain private and personal documents and data such as ideological and religious preferences, medical information, intimate letters, internal reports, etc. that are not intended to be publicly accessible. Public awareness and legal prescriptions on privacy issues – i.e. the European General Data Protection Regulation – have increased in recent years. Processing (changing, reading, storing, etc.) these data is highly restricted and can only be allowed for well-defined (research) objectives. Some information even can’t be made public in an inventory or catalogue by law. Also publications can contain this ‘sensitive’ information. The yearbooks of the Flemish province of the Society of Jesus, for example, give detailed overviews of all names, residences and functions of their members. They are conceived and distributed as internal documents ad usum nostris soli and can only be consulted for research projects, under strict conditions and after permission of the
Society. These consultation mechanisms – a clear outline of the goal of each request for consultation, chronological embargo's and the preliminary permission of the heritage owners – are important aspects of the policy of KADOC.

Since 1990, KADOC is located in the buildings of a former Franciscan convent in the city centre of Leuven with facilities to manage and store heritage, space for small exhibitions in the former chapel and convent corridors, and a consultation room for researchers. At the end of the 20th century, lack of storing space forced KADOC to look for additional infrastructure. In 2006 a large heritage depot was inaugurated in Heverlee, just outside the city centre of Leuven, offering new storage room and a professional working environment for the selection, cleaning and disclosure of heritage collections. Meanwhile, KADOC also made the digital turn. It developed a policy and methodologies for the intake and preservation of the heritage of the future: born digital videos, documents, photographs and publications as well as digitised heritage. A modular system of tools – Lias, ‘Leuven Integrated Archival System’ – was developed to manage, describe, store, preserve and make digital heritage available.8 The system is a joint project of the KU Leuven University Archives and KADOC, but participation of other partners is encouraged to spread investments and to build high-quality or even state-of-the-art tools.

As a heritage partner KADOC currently preserves a broad range of audiovisual collections, archives and library collections of persons, families, small and big organisations related to the field of religion, culture and society since 1750 in Flanders (from a Belgian and international perspective), with a focus on heritage of an (inter)national or regional significance. Objects are only stored as part of an archive or if there is a direct link with other preserved materials, like for example educational games that are related to schoolbooks of religious institutes. The collection includes the heritage of about hundred religious institutes, their members and related organisations. If only these are considered, already a broad spectrum of themes and societal domains come into view. Next to these KADOC holds more than 1500 heritage collections of lay organisations. Some examples are the collections of national and international Christian unions, labour movements, employer associations and farmer movements; heritage collections of Flemish Christian democratic politicians and political parties; youth organisations like Belgian boys and girls scouts; heritage created or collected by (international) media organisations like the World Catholic Association for Communication (SIGNIS). Heritage of evangelical, ecumenical and pastoral organisations are present in the collection, as are artistic and craftsmen archives; for example the atelier archives of François

Capronnier and his heirs, who were internationally renowned stained-glass artists and left a large and precious collection of religious and other designs. The KADOC collection totals a volume of over 26 km of classified paper archives, 208,000 publications, 15,000 periodicals and 650,000 digital objects in 2021. Within this overall picture, the archives, publications and audiovisual materials of religious institutes are among the most valuable, most consulted and most valorised collections.

Most of these collections contain small or large library collections that are integrated in the heritage library of KADOC, supplemented with donations of publications from private persons. At the heart of the collection is the so-called ‘grey literature’: all kinds of publications, books, brochures, periodicals, serials, comics, related to or produced by the wide range of heritage creators mentioned above. The grey literature differs from the collections that can be found in either academic or public libraries and it offers a unique panorama of themes and research potential related to the field of religion, culture and society. With regard to religious institutes for example, the collection contains unique historical or missionary journals that where distributed among members and supporters of orders and congregations as well as school journals of convent boarding schools or monographs about local history. Although KADOC focuses on post-1750 heritage, it does preserve some precious early prints and items that are beautifully illustrated or bound. But publications don’t have to be old to be valuable or to be welcomed in the collection. KADOC aims to capture recent brochures, electronic journals and online media of the vibrant organisations it ‘follows’ in the field of religion, culture and society in order to build and preserve a collection that illustrates the contemporaneous evolutions in the field.

Not all heritage that is offered to KADOC is integrated in the collection of the centre. Each deposit is considered from the perspective of the collection plan and even after deposit an appraisal process is started. Whereas archives, according to international standards, are preserved as homogenous collections to include as much relevant context information as possible, this is rarely the case for library collections. In general, each publication or series is evaluated separately to see if it fits the requirements of the collection plan. Preserving entire library collections would be neither possible, nor relevant. This would result in unresolvable (and unaffordable) storage problems as well as large numbers of duplicates that are held in other heritage libraries. Evidently,

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9 All collections preserved by KADOC and their inventories can be found in Lias: https://abs.lias.be. The library catalogue of KADOC can be consulted through the LIMO-LIBIS platform of KU Leuven: https://limo.libis.be.
valuable sub-collections and individual titles that exceed the collection profile are not destroyed, but reallocated in consultation with relevant partners, as will be explained further on. With the Maurits Sabbe Library of the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies of KU Leuven, for example, a formal agreement exists to explicit and facilitate this reallocation.

Although intake and storage of entire libraries is not possible, KADOC acknowledges the value of information about the library collection as a whole to safeguard context information about the creation, the specificities as well as the general range of the collection. The centre has a long tradition of integrated disclosure and contextualisation of the heritage it preserves. To do so, KADOC developed different strategies and tools. One of them is to carefully preserve the original catalogues, inventories and index cards of dismantled libraries and insert these overviews in the archives of the original owners or creators of the library. For some collections, information on provenance is added in the catalogue. As such, a virtual reconstruction of the original collection will always be possible. To preserve as much context information as possible links are made between the different collections of a heritage creator: inventories of archives contain links to descriptions in the library catalogue and other related archives in the catalogue and vice versa. Links are also made to metadata about the heritage creators and their collections. This authority information is centralised and published in the online contextual and relational database ODIS. The existence of this web of linked (online) data creates opportunities to open up the spectrum and link the heritage in the repositories of KADOC to similar collections and information that exists elsewhere.

Acquisition and conservation is not the only strategy of the centre to retain valuable heritage, however. Since its foundation in 1976, KADOC has invested in the development of consultancy services for religious institutes with regard to important aspects of their heritage: archives, libraries and audiovisual collections as well as, in recent decades, digital heritage. The consultancy was outlined from a threefold perspective: registration, formation and advice and it touches both archival and library collections. Archivists of religious institutes learned the basics of archival management and care of heritage during workshops organised at KADOC. Semi-annually a thematic seminar was organised.

10 See for example: KADOC, Archive of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary Huldenberg, BE/942855/1769/2849; KADOC, Archive of the Pore Clares – Monasterium Eeklo, BE/942855/2373/61.
11 Provenance information was registered for example for the library collections of the Society of Jesus, Ursuline Sisters of Namur, Friars Minor, Augustinian Hospital Sisters Lier.
12 The catalogues and databases are listed and available via the homepage or website of KADOC: https://kadoc.kuleuven.be/english/2_heritage.
(‘Ontmoetingsdagen’) and in 1990 a manual for the care of archives of religious institutes was published. From 2004 onwards, the work could be expanded. With the financial support of the Flemish government, a registration program for convent archives was developed, resulting in an online archive guide for religious institutes in Flanders and Brussels, centralised in the abovementioned database ODIS.

With regard to library collections of religious institutes, KADOC organised courses and conferences for convent librarians, often in collaboration with the umbrella organisations of the religious institutes and the Flemish association of religious librarians (VRB – ‘Expertisehouders Levensbeschouwelijke Collecties’). These initiatives focused both on practical library management as well as on sensibilisation about the value and potential of libraries of religious institutes. In recent decades, due to the well-known evolutions in the convent world, the focus of the heritage consultancy shifted from formation to advice and guidance. This aspect has a double goal. First, the aim is to support convent archivists and librarians to enable them to preserve their collections in situ as long as possible. A second objective, growing in importance, is to help religious institutes in the decision making process about the relocation and transfer of their heritage collections when it is no longer possible to preserve them in their original location. This consultancy strengthened the close partnership between religious institutes and KADOC, and also allowed to develop digital facilities for preservation of (born) digital heritage and management of descriptions in Lias and related expertise networks available for them to use.

The expansion and changes of emphasis of the KADOC-consultancy demonstrate the need and relevance of a partnership between the convent world and professional heritage institutions. An important asset is the strong link between the heritage services at KADOC, its research department and internal and external valorisation projects. KADOC’s research initiatives seek to clarify the cultural and social impact of religion and its many material and immaterial manifestations related to a large diversity of interdisciplinary perspectives: gender, transnationalism and regionalism, imagination and practices, popular religion, intercultural exchanges, religion and science, religious entrepreneurship, subalternity, religious conflict and tolerance ... Furthermore exhibitions are curated by the centre itself or in partnership with others. Archives, publications and audiovisual material of religious institutes are very precious in this regard. Recent research projects, conferences and exhibitions

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13 The information about the archives of religious institutes is stored and made accessible via the online database ODIS: http://www.odis.be.
14 Suenens, Ad Fontes, 12.

Permanent research platforms have been developed to promote valorisation of Jesuit heritage and history (IGNIS – Leuven Centre for Jesuit Studies) and to re-invigorate international and interdisciplinary research on missionaries (MiMORA – Mission and Modernity Research Academy).\footnote{For more information about IGNIS and MiMORA, see the website of KADOC: https://kadoc.kuleuven.be/english.} These are only a few illustrations of the historical, social and cultural importance of heritage of religious institutes in general, and their library collections in particular.

3 Convent Libraries: a Diverse and Fascinating Terrain of Religious Heritage

Libraries of religious institutes in Flanders (and Belgium) represent to a large extent the diversity of the religious world itself as well as its embedding in a larger clerical and societal context: traditional monastic orders, mendicant orders, orders of canons regular and clerics, congregations and societies of priests, sisters or brothers; institutes with a contemplative, apostolic or mixed focus; large institutes with a national or international scope or regional and even local institutes. All of these institutes built, developed and cared for library collections, according to their own spiritual, pastoral, intellectual and apostolic identities and dependent on the available infrastructural, financial and human resources.

Many collections are still preserved \textit{in situ}, in the context of the original convent or religious community. Some of them are well-documented, catalogued and renowned. This is certainly the case for the libraries of – especially male – abbeys of monastic orders, orders of canon regulars (the Norbertines in particular) and convents of mendicant orders, sometimes representing historical
collections reaching into the Middle Ages. In recent years, projects and publications have also focused on the challenges related to these vast and historical valuable collections. Others, like for example the convent libraries of many 19th- and 20th-century congregations of apostolic female religious, are less known and did not receive a lot of attention from researchers and heritage professionals. In many cases, the richness and diversity of these collections only comes to the front when religious institutes start thinking about the future of their heritage in consultation with other heritage partners and professionals. This offers an opportunity to draw, perhaps for the first time, a panorama of the library heritage of religious institutes in their overall diversity and complexity and beyond the traditional focus on famous and old monastic collections. The following survey of a selection of library collections of religious institutes that were deposited at KADOC offers a glimpse of this interesting diversity, but also focuses on the motives, partnerships and practical issues related to the reallocation and future of the libraries of religious institutes in Flanders.

In 2005, in preparation of relocation plans, the nuns of the Benedictine abbey of Maria Mediatrix (Hekelgem, Flemish-Brabant) deposited a large part of their monastic library at KADOC. Despite their relatively young history – the abbey was founded in 1921 – the Benedictines of Maria Mediatrix had built an impressive collection of books and periodicals. The items covered a wide range of philosophical, theological and psychological themes and subjects related to Church history and Flemish literature, reflecting the high intellectual and artistic profile of the community in Hekelgem. The deposit consisted of 4,000 items, representing the oldest and thematically diverse parts of the library collection (with a total volume of 10,000 items). The selection

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17 Basic information about these collections can be found, among non-religious collections, in the digital repertories of ‘Vlaamse Erfgoedbibliotheken’ (www.collectiewijzer.be). The last, but outdated printed overview, already dates from 1983: Gids van theologische bibliotheken in Nederland en Vlaanderen (Voorburg: Protestantse Stichting tot Bevordering van het Bibliotheekwezen en de Lectuurvoorlichting in Nederland, 1983).


19 This chapter only highlights a few library collections of religious institutes preserved at KADOC.

was made by KADOC-collaborators in consultation with the nuns of Maria Mediatrix, taking in consideration the specificities of the collection plan of KADOC as well as the preferences and future plans of the monastic community. The deposit of the library preceded that of the important abbey archives, which were transferred to KADOC some months later. Both collections were soon consulted by students and researchers.\textsuperscript{21}

Other contemplative women religious, like for example the Discalced Carmelite nuns of Ghent and Leopoldsburg, transferred their libraries to KADOC when leaving their monasteries, in 2008 and 2012 respectively. For the Carmelite nuns of Ghent it was decided, in consultation with the sisters and the diocesan authorities, to transfer the entire library to KADOC. The archives of the convent were deposited in the provincial archives of the Carmelites in Ghent. The library of the monastery of Ghent, dating back to the 16th century, was remarkable and unique for its integrality and intactness, including a detailed (and complete) system of index cards. The library of about 5,000 titles especially consisted of devotional and hagiographical literature, representing the typical Carmelite spirituality and history. But the collection also illustrated the apostolic activities of these contemplative sisters, more specifically the output of their 20th-century, small-scale editing company focusing on devotional literature about Carmelite sources of inspiration such as Theresa of Lisieux and Carmelite missionary calendars.\textsuperscript{22}

The library of their fellow sisters in Leopoldsburg, counting about 5,000 titles, was not entirely transferred to KADOC. Many publications and periodicals were already present in the KADOC-collection due to previous acquisitions. The sisters of Leopoldsburg, in consultation with KADOC, relocated typical Carmelite literature to other monasteries of their order. The part that was transferred to KADOC reflected in an interesting way the open mind of the relatively young Carmelite foundation – the convent was founded in 1924: books about science and societal themes, as well as (unexpected aspects of)
their daily life, interests and leisure, with instruction books for needlework, literature and theatre culture.\textsuperscript{23}

Like the collection of the Carmelites of Ghent and Leopoldsburg, the library of the Poor Clares of Leuven also offered an overview of the spirituality and history of the convent (founded in 1838) and the order: rulebooks, constitutions, Franciscan spirituality and devotion, literature about the major personalities of the Franciscan order (St. Francis, St. Claire) and about important reformers like St. Colette of Corbie, the founding mother of the Poor Clare-Colettine reform to which the sisters of Leuven belonged. Among the 7,000 volumes was also a remarkable diversity of items about secularisation, ecumenism, yoga and sexuality and themes like literature, psychology, sociology and the exact

sciences, reflecting the open mind of the post-1950 Poor Clare community in the university city of Leuven.24

If the libraries of the Benedictines, Carmelites and Poor Clares were more or less ‘manageable’ collections, this was not the case with major heritage transfers of important male orders, such as the Friars Minor. Between 2006 and 2009 KADOC coordinated a project for the reallocation of the heritage of the Friars Minor of the provincial house in Sint-Truiden. Besides the provincial archives, the project also included the extensive library connected to the archives.25 This library of over 30,000 titles (manuscripts and publications) and nearly 800 periodicals covered a wide thematic and chronological area: Franciscan history and spirituality, theology, hagiography, missionary themes and art history. To handle the reallocation of a religious library of that size, a partnership was created between KADOC and other heritage institutions such as: the Maurits Sabbe Library, the library of ‘Museum De Mindere’ in Sint-Truiden (with focus on the history of the Flemish Friars Minor) and the ‘Bibliotheek Hasselt Limburg’ (formerly known as provincial library of the province of Limburg).26 After an intensive screening of the collection, the different parts of the archive library of the Friars Minor were attributed to the different heritage institutes, according to their respective collection profiles and research aims. A central register of the original collection that carefully recorded the different transfers was made and allows researchers to (virtually) reconstruct the original archive library of the Friars Minor at all times.

The reallocation and acquisition of the library linked to the provincial archives in Sint-Truiden was not the only occasion when library collections of the Friars Minor found their way to KADOC (or another institute of the above-mentioned partnership). Several libraries of Flemish convents of the Friars Minor were reallocated in a similar way. In 2019, for example, a selection of titles from the convent library of Sint-Truiden was transferred to KADOC and the Maurits Sabbe Library when the Friars Minor left their ‘mother’ convent after a presence of nearly eight centuries.27

26 For the collection that was transferred to the Maurits Sabbe Library, see: “Provenance Collections at the Maurits Sabbe Library,” https://bib.kuleuven.be/english/heritage/heritagecollections/provenance/provenance-collections [accessed May 4, 2021].
The case of the Friars Minor – with a collection of several libraries with different thematic and chronological focuses, preserved at several locations and following different reallocation trajectories dependent on the decision making processes of the religious institute itself – is exemplary for the complexity of many others. Only a few libraries of religious institutes preserved at KADOC were deposited as a more or less homogeneous or delineated collection. In case of institutes or congregations counting multiple convents and a large number of members, libraries were often transferred partially or fragmentary.

Another interesting example are the library collections of the Belgian congregation of the Missionaries of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (CICM), known as the Missionaries of Scheut. Founded as a Belgian missionary congregation in the hamlet of Scheut in Anderlecht (near Brussels) in 1862, this institute had a worldwide expansion, totalling a number of nearly 2,000 members around the middle of the 20th century. In the late 1990s, already some individual Scheut Fathers deposited their personal archives and libraries at KADOC. It was the start of a long process of acquisitions. In the early years of the 21st century, libraries of several Belgian convents – e.g. Scheut, Leuven – were transferred to KADOC, followed in 2003 by the missionary library of the congregation and in 2004 by the immensely valuable collection of the *scripita confratorum*, i.e. the writings, research and publications of members of the congregation. The *scripita* were transferred together with the general archives of the congregations, preserved until then at the generalate in Rome. Important additions to the CICM-collections followed in 2008. These publications and periodicals offer an exceptionally rich potential for research that largely transcends religious, clerical or missionary history, but also informs about linguistics, culture, ethnology, agriculture, architecture and geography of the (former) missionary territories of the congregation.28

Similar processes of scattered acquisitions were also the case for other congregations, like the Ursuline Sisters of Tildonk. The congregation, founded in 1818, was one of Flanders’ most important teaching congregations, famous in Belgium and abroad for its prestigious elite boarding schools for girls. Already in 2005, due to renovation and relocation works, the library of the oldest boarding school of the congregation in Tildonk, was transferred to KADOC. The collection reflected the history of school life, the pedagogical and didactical evolution of the boarding school as well as its international pupil population.

In consultation with the sisters, titles reflecting the general history and aspects of school life were selected by KADOC, whereas publications related to local history were deposited at the municipal library of Tildonk (Haacht). As was the case for all library collections mentioned above, much attention was paid to the preservation of the general catalogue of the library of the Tildonk boarding school.29

In 2019 the congregation decided to make a new heritage deposit at KADOC. The general archives of the congregation were transferred from Tildonk to Leuven, as well as the small, but interesting and cherished library collection of their founder, Fr. Joannes Lambertz (1785–1869). It was the explicit wish of the congregation that the library of Lambertz would be preserved and catalogued as a specific part of their heritage. The thematic scope of this collection exceeds to a large extent the history of the Ursulines of Tildonk. Lambertz’ library, of which the oldest volumes date back to 1626, provides an interesting insight in the spiritual, devotional and theological interests of a 19th-century priest. The presence of a collection of religious rule books and historical surveys of the Ursuline order also allows to reconstruct the main sources of inspiration for his project of a sister congregation.30

Another library of Ursuline Sisters that was deposited at KADOC illustrates yet additional dimensions and potentials of the heritage of (female) religious institutes. In 2017 the archives and library of the Ursuline Sisters of Namur were transferred to KADOC, due to the departure of the sisters from their convent buildings. Since the middle of the 20th century, the Namur sisters were associated with the congregation of Ursuline Sisters of Onze-Lieve-Vrouw Waver, a 19th-century offspring of the aforementioned sisters of Tildonk. But the history of the convent in Namur was far more older and dated back to the middle of the 17th century. The convent library covers this century-old history of the Namur convent and gives a panorama of the spiritual inspirations of the Ursuline Sisters. Three centuries of publications also offer fascinating sources to reconstruct the evolution of the pedagogical program of this religious institute that was one of the pioneers of female education in the Southern Netherlands, as well as the relationships of this group of religious women with the ‘outside’ world of publishers and booksellers.31

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The library of the Namur Ursuline Sisters was not only made up of books and periodicals ordered or collected by the Belgian sisters. A substantial part was coming from the French Ursuline Sisters of the convent of Evreux. As many other religious institutes in France, this sister community fled their home country following the anticlerical politics of the French government at the beginning of the 20th century. The French Ursuline Sisters found a shelter at the Namur convent and parts of their library that were evacuated from France were integrated in the collection of the Belgian sisters. As such, the library of the Ursuline Sisters of Namur is interesting for researchers studying Ursuline history in Belgium as well as in France.

FIGURE 15.2 *Le poète des mœurs* (Tome II – Namur: J.F. Stapleaux, 1772) is exemplary for the diversity of the library of the Ursulines of Namur, containing religious as well as profane literature illustrating the spiritual and pedagogical identity of the convent and their teaching apostolate.

Heritage Partnerships: Challenges and Opportunities

Though concise and fragmentary, this survey of libraries of orders and congregations preserved at KADOC gives an idea about the diversity, the importance and the broad scope of the heritage of religious institutes. However, it also points to some unavoidable complexities with regard to contemporary questions of reallocation, selection and preservation. By far the most challenging issue is related to the volume and overlap of these religious library collections. The phenomenon is not solely a Belgian problem. Also in Germany, for example, similar issues are detected and discussed. Each convent library was formed, expanded and cherished by dozens, hundreds or even more religious men and women in a time span of years, decades and centuries. This process resulted in elaborate collections, ranging from several thousands of titles and volumes in local or relatively young (19th and 20th centuries) institutes to 50,000 or more in libraries of large congregations and Flemish or Belgian provinces of international orders. Reallocating heritage collections of that size is extremely problematic because most professional heritage institutions lack the funds and the capacity to store and catalogue them. Moreover, despite the abovementioned diversity, religious institutes evidently share many aspects of their history, identity and interests. This common ground is also reflected in their libraries. From the rule of Saint Augustine, over De Imitatione Christi by Thomas a Kempis to Interior Castle of St. Teresa of Avila and many, many more: all of these religious basics are found, often in an astonishing diversity of editions, in almost all convent libraries. Moreover, the collections of publications related to the apostolic domains of the religious institutes, dealing with, for instance, pedagogy, science, nursing, pastoral work, etc., often show strong parallels. From our experiences, libraries of religious institutes share 75% to 80% of their publications and periodicals. In libraries of institutes with a common spirituality or active on similar apostolic domains, these numbers are even higher.

In the current situation, when many religious institutes think about the future of their libraries or decide to transfer their collections to heritage institutions, the vast volumes and important overlap force professional librarians to make choices and to search for collaborations and partnerships. The thematic and chronological scope of many professional heritage institutes does not coincide, or at least not completely, with the diversity in convent libraries.

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The focus of the KADOC heritage library, for example, is on publications and periodicals in the field of religion, culture and society since 1750 in Flanders and Belgium. Science learning books (published by non-religious editors), periodicals of local historical societies (often found in local convent libraries) or early printed bibles, for example, fall beyond its collection limits. Unless a direct link can be made with the religious institute or one of its members – as author, editor, reader (through personal notes) – another solution has to be found for these categories of publications to preserve them for future generations. For this purpose, cooperation with a broad network of heritage institutions is indispensable. As mentioned in the case studies above, university, diocesan and regional or local (public) libraries are important partners.

So far, the examples mainly illustrated partnerships in the context of reallocation and transfer projects. It is important to remark that partnerships and cooperation with regard to libraries of religious institutes do not necessarily have to result in displacement of religious heritage. In some cases, the decision is made to permanently preserve the library in the context of its origin and development. An interesting case study in this regard is the library of the Saint-Bernard Abbey of Bornem. This abbey of the Cistercians was founded in 1833, but its history dates back to the 13th century. Despite the fact that most of its heritage was confiscated during the French regime at the end of the 19th century, in the 19th and 20th century the monks re-collected a series of incunables and early printed books as well as a rich diversity of titles about the Cistercian order. In 1872, an impressive two-store library room was constructed, with space for over 30,000 titles.

In 2008, the Cistercian community of Bornem opted for a leasehold, and later on sold, their abbey buildings to the municipality of Bornem. A large-scale restauration and redevelopment project was designed, including the 19th-century library room. For the restauration and conservation of the collection a partnership was created between the Cistercians, civil authorities and services (municipality of Bornem, heritage services of the Province of Antwerp) and professional heritage partners (KADOC, Maurits Sabbe Library and PARCUM). Between 2012 and 2016, a group of eighty local volunteers cleaned, restored and digitally catalogued the library collection. In cooperation with KADOC an additional collection of over 10,000 publications, stored in the ceilings of the abbey, was catalogued and selected as well. After a period

of external storage during the restauration of the abbey, the collection was retransferred to its original location in 2021.\textsuperscript{34}

The heritage partnership in Bornem enabled the \textit{in situ} preservation of an extensive religious library during (and beyond) the presence of the last generation of Cistercians. Though promising and exemplary, it is clear that this solution is far from evident. It could only succeed thanks to a massive financial input of civil authorities and a large and enthusiastic network of local volunteers. The project also required and will require a long-term engagement of the partnership to secure the future of the library for next generations.

When considering these heritage partnerships for library collections of religious institutes, some other essential aspects have to be taken in account. First, a close and permanent consultation with the religious institutes as heritage creators and owners is crucial. Sometimes, as presented in some of the above-mentioned examples, religious institutes decide to transfer their entire libraries. In other cases, convent communities prefer to keep on preserving parts of their libraries themselves, often those that are closely related to their spiritual and historical identity. In this decision making process, it is important to seek for solutions that are both realistic and in accordance with the wishes of the convent communities. The consultancy, as it was described above from the perspective of KADOC, is important to create a platform of mutual confidence that facilitates the quests for acceptable solutions and softens the practical and emotional burdens associated with the transfer of heritage of religious institutes.

Second, reallocation or division of libraries of religious institutes may not lead to a loss of information about the full content of the original collections. Particular attention must be given to the preservation of catalogues, inventories or index cards of religious libraries. As mentioned above, KADOC integrates these crucial documents in the archives of religious institutes it preserves. In other cases, the individual items from the convent libraries were ingested into the library catalogues of KADOC with a specific provenance reference linking the titles and periodicals to the library they were once part of. Both research instruments, original catalogues and provenance registration, enable religious institutes, researchers or other interested parties to virtually reconstruct and study the original libraries at all times. Despite the fact that it does not entirely compensate for the irrevocable decomposition of the original

setting of the libraries, this virtual construction preserves an important part of the historical, theological, spiritual, apostolic and intellectual identity of religious institutes.

Third and last, it is important to integrate the focus on library collections of religious institutes in a larger project of heritage conservation. If convent communities are confronted with questions about their future, libraries are rarely the only point of concern. Archives, audiovisual materials, textiles, art and cultural objects present challenges as well. Moreover, many cross-references exist between these different types of collections. Partnerships can offer solutions for an integral approach to secure these relevant links. In this respect, KADOC not only co-operates with the abovementioned partners but also closely collaborates with PARCUM – Museum & Centre of Expertise for Religious Art and Culture. PARCUM’s expertise in the field of religious art and cultural objects is substantial to select and preserve historical and religiously important heritage collections, within or outside the original religious setting. Since the ‘spatial’ and often voluminous material collections are often the first point to consider when religious communities discuss their future, the cooperation with PARCUM forms a gateway to further debate about the future of convent heritage collections, including convent libraries.

This highlights once again the rich potential of partnerships on the domain of heritage of religious institutes. A cooperation between religious institutes, academic (theological) libraries (Maurits Sabbe Library), local libraries, museums and heritage institutions, umbrella organisations, associations of religious librarians (VRB) and accredited heritage institutes like PARCUM and KADOC is crucial in order to develop professional and ambitious, but realistic future plans for the complex field of religious library collections today.

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